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# Who are the Transgendered and What Does it Mean

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TRANSGENDER:  
WHO ARE THE TRANSGENDERED  
AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

There are a variety of people who fall into the category of transgendered. Typically, most people identify transgendered with male-to-female transsexuals and transvestites. This may be because they are the most visible on the television talk circuit. However, there are several different categories:

**INTERSEXUAL** -- Intersex people are hermaphrodites. These people may have been born with either the developed or under-developed genitalia of both sexes. Some may have been born with the external genitalia of one sex and the internal organs of the other. Since the 1950s, the medical profession has encouraged emergency sex assignment with early genital surgery or removal of the conflicting organs. Many intersexed people feel that this medical intervention harmed them more than it helped them.

**TRANSSEXUAL** -- A person who had a gender identity of that of the opposite sex. They completely alter their body through sexual reassignment surgery and hormone treatment to align their body with their gender identity. Transsexuals fall into two categories, pre-operative and post-operative.

**TRANSGENDERIST** -- A person who has decided to live her or his life in the gender role assigned to the opposite genetic sex. They may alter their body through cosmetic surgery and hormone treatment to appear more like the opposite genetic sex.

**ANDROGYNE** -- A person who's gender role is ambivalent. They appear to be neither definitively male nor definitively female; a combination of both roles.

**CROSS-DRESSER** -- A person who dresses either partially or fully in clothing typically assigned to the opposite genetic sex. Also known as transvestites. The motivations for cross-dressing vary from sexual to self-image. They may adopt a dual gender identity of both male and female personas.

**DRAG QUEEN** -- There are two definitions. Either a male homosexual who dresses in flamboyant styles or one who allows male characteristics to show while dressed as a woman. Many people believe they parody women. They are a small minority but highly visible. (Not to be confused with a female impersonator.)

**DRAG KING** -- A lesbian who adopts the male role and dresses completely in male attire. They are unlike drag queens in

that they do not parody men. Also, they can be considered under the transgenderist category.

**FEMALE AND MALE IMPERSONATORS** -- Female impersonators are often confused with drag queens. While some drag queens are female impersonators, this is not always the case. Female and male impersonators are those people who adopt the attire of the opposite genetic sex for entertainment.

The sexual orientation of the people who fall into these categories is as varied as that of society in general. They can be gay men, lesbians, heterosexuals, bisexuals or asexuals. Most studies show that they are predominantly heterosexual, but the validity of these studies is in doubt. However, one thing is a given, that gender orientation is independent of sexual orientation or preference.

There is a possibility that someone you know falls into one of these categories and you don't know it. Because of the negative social stigma attached to transgendered behaviour, most people keep their transgendered status very private (in the closet so to speak). Since gender is an artificial model of behaviour expectation or society based on anatomical sex (stereotypes for female and male behaviour ideals) and we have been conditioned since early childhood in this regard, many people are fearful of revealing their transgendered status.

#### WHAT ARE THE ISSUES OF TRANSGENDERED PEOPLE?

Their issues are the same as everyone else's. They want to live their lives freely and openly without being discriminated against. Unfortunately there are some people who don't agree.

As the law in Rhode Island is currently written, transgendered people have no legal recourse against discrimination. They can be fired from their jobs, denied employment, evicted from their homes (if they rent), denied credit, denied entry into business establishments and in some cases arrested and harassed by the police.

There is a provision in the Rhode Island law covering those perceived to be homosexual. And, while many people who identify a transgendered person will say, "Hey look at the fag (or queen)!", rather than "There goes one of those transgendered people.", will this provision cover transgendered people? It does if the person who discriminates does so because he believes a transgendered person to be gay. However, what happens when that person says he or she didn't discriminate because the transgendered person is gay but because he or she is transgendered? With the many talk shows that have focused on transgendered people this is indeed a possibility.

Also, what happens when a gay person discriminates against a transgendered person? Again, under present law, the transgendered person has no legal course of action to pursue.

Sexual orientation as described by Rhode Island law only covers heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals. It does not cover transsexuals, intersexuals or other transgendered folks.

As for the law covering gender, again the transgendered are not covered. Since our society bases it's ideas of gender on sexual dimorphism and a binary system, gender is divided into only two groups; male and female. There is no room for other genders and the law reflects this view.

Since as previously stated, the rights of transgendered people are not protected, they have no legal recourse under the present law or within the legal system. It is for this reason that transgender must be included.

There are some people who will say that transgendered people are sexual deviants, child molesters, exhibitionists or mentally ill. (In regards to this last description, the American Psychiatric Association has changed it's diagnosis of transgender activity. The DSM-IV no longer categorizes transgender behaviour as a mental disorder.) Since the transgendered community is a microcosm of society at large, there are probably a few people who fit the stereotypes many ascribe to transgendered people as a whole. However, by far, the overwhelming majority of transgendered people are responsible, normal people.

Transgendered behaviour is a positive expression of one's personality. An expression of a partial or complete cross-gender identity. It is a very natural trait and one which evidence shows has been present in almost every society since pre-history.

Some examples are the priestess of Cybele, Diana or Artemis of Esphesus, Astarte of Alexandria, and among several Germanic tribes (although historians have identified these people as eunuches, they disregarded that these priestesses were men who lived as women, not merely castrated men.); the Mahus of Polynesian cultures; the Berdache, Winkte, etc. of native American cultures; Hijras of India; the Katoys of Thailand and southeast Asia; and a traditional class of men who adopt female attire and societal roles in some Arab countries. Just as through history, transgendered people have existed in almost every culture, they exist today in every nation.

There are no positive conclusions concerning transgendered behaviour. Like other behaviours, theories revolve around the old nature versus nurture arguments. However, recent scientific research has advanced the theory that gender confusion in some people may be related to a pre-natal lack of the appropriate hormones in the mother's body. One thing that has been discovered is that this condition is not curable by psychiatrists or physicians. Even sexual reassignment surgery for transsexuals is not a cure. It is merely a method of reconciling their physical bodies with their mental image of themselves.

Transgendered people are often mistaken for gay men and lesbians. This not only happens in the dominant

heterosexual community, but also in the less dominant gay and lesbian community. Male-to-female transgendered people are identified as gay men and female-to-males are identified as lesbians. Some of these people who have been so identified are the author Louis Sullivan, newspaperman Jack B. Garland, musician Billy Tipton and Teena Brandon, all female-to-male transgendered people. Others who identify with the transgender community are authors Leslie Feinberg and Kate Bornstein and musician Wendy Carlos.

This identification of transgendered people as gay men or lesbians infuriates some transgendered activists. They see it as the lesbian and gay community appropriating transgendered history and leaving the transgendered community behind.

There is much discussion about the inclusion of transgender in legislation. Influential members of the national PFLAG organization and national gay and lesbian organizations have argued for the exclusion of transgender from any future legislation and activities. This has resulted in a bitter debate between the two communities as well as within the lesbian and gay community.

In 1993, a contingent of approximately 50 transgendered people participated in the March On Washington. Unfortunately, most people don't know this. As the transgendered contingent was about to turn right and follow the march route back to the mall and the main reviewing stands (where the television cameras were set-up), march marshals redirected the group to turn left. One of the march officials was overheard commenting to another, "We don't want to confuse people about why we are here." As I overheard this comment, I couldn't help thinking, "Funny, I thought the purpose was to support equal rights." After a heated discussion, during which the rest of the marchers were held up, we turned left and had a march of our own.

In 1994, two transgender activists (one a practicing lawyer in Texas, the other a professional engineer) were in Washington to testify for transgender inclusion in "The Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 1994". Those members of the lesbian and gay community who were managing the bill blocked them from testifying. Why? The reasoning was that they didn't want to have the transgender stereotype act as a distraction to the passage of the bill. Witnesses testifying against the bill hauled out the transgender stereotype anyway.

Also in 1994, the organizers of the Stonewall 25 celebration and march originally refused to allow a transgendered contingent to participate in the march. After much heated debate over several months, they finally said that transgendered people could participate as long as they didn't carry any banners or signs identifying them as transgendered (Sound familiar?). Finally an agreement was reached and male and female transgendered people proudly marched. The transgendered contingent was three blocks long

and there was a four-block long contingent of drag queens (female impersonators of various types).

From 1992 until 1994, organizers of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival had refused to allow transgendered women into the Festival. In 1994 they even refused entry to Leslie Feinberg. However, this was the year that they finally relented and allowed transsexual women into the festival. Even then, they had to have bodyguards from the Lesbian Avengers because some feminist women threatened violence.

In 1993, Golden Threads, an organization for lesbians over 50 and their friends, decided to exclude transgendered women from their organization and yearly celebration in Provincetown.

In 1994 and 1995, the mayor of St. Paul, MN, refused to sign a proclamation for Gay Pride Week because it included transgender, even though the city council supported the proclamation. Fortunately, the lesbian and gay community refused to change the wording of the proclamation and went on without him. Minnesota is the only state in the Union that explicitly includes transgendered people in the state law prohibiting discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people.

Also in 1994, San Francisco enacted legislation to include transgender in the civil rights legislation which protects lesbians, gays and bisexual people. I haven't heard what happened with the state-wide initiative.

Earlier this year, the National Lesbian and Gay Law Association came out in support of transgender inclusion in all legislation. Part of their resolution reads: "Whereas the National Lesbian and Gay Law Association recognizes the need for all sexual and gender minorities to have protection of employment; therefore

Be it resolved that the National Lesbian and Gay Law Association, through its Board of Directors meeting on the 15th day of January 1995:

- (1) strongly urges all persons, organizations and coalitions to consider and advance the rights of transgendered persons in their programs and deliberations, and
- (2) strongly urges Members of Congress to include the transgendered in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 1994 (ENDA) and any successor or amended bills, and
- (3) strongly urges members of state and local legislatures and regulatory bodies to include transgendered persons in all statutes, ordinances and regulations that also or already positively affect or protect lesbian, gay and bisexual people, and other oppressed minorities.

Also earlier this year in April, the Lesbian/Gay Rights Lobby of Texas decided to exclude transgendered people from the proposed Texas Hate Crime legislation. The LGRL organization marched through downtown Austin in support of the bill. The march was protested by It's Time, Texas!, a transgendered organization. As a result, LGRL held an unscheduled board meeting that was reported to be quite

heated. In the end, the board voted down three demands of ITT. These were: That any hate crimes legislation contain language specifically including the transgendered; that a transgendered person be added to the LGRL board; and that a member of ITT be allowed to address the LGRL post-march rally. The board did reach a compromise with the ITT to form a committee to study the inclusion of transgender in the hate crime legislation and the third demand was met and one of the ITT members was allowed to address the post-march rally.

Here we are nearing the end of 1995 and transgendered people are still being excluded from some lesbian and gay organizations and proposed legislation, even here in Rhode Island the transgendered were the sacrificial lambs to ensure that the current bill would have a chance in the house.

On the national scene, the Human Rights Campaign Fund still refuses to include transgender and bisexual language in any of its efforts.

Perhaps for some the cry of "Equal rights for all citizens" is empty rhetoric to play on the heart strings of sympathizers.

Equal rights for all citizens whether on a national or state level is the goal. As long as transgendered people and bisexual people are left out, none of us have any freedom for as long as one person is persecuted, we have all lost our freedom.

One last thought, during the campaign for the so-called gay rights legislation, I constantly heard people state that lesbians and gays are the last group of people within Rhode Island who it was legal to discriminate against. Some of the people making this statement knew better they were the ones who purposely and deliberately denied transgender inclusion in the bill. This may appear to some that the author of this is bitter. No, not bitter, disappointed yes, but not bitter.

The Rhode Island lesbian and gay community is divided over the transgender exclusion. There are many people in the community who do not trust the organization which backed the bill and made the decision to exclude transgender. Many transgendered people will have nothing to do with any future legislation this organization may bring up because they were betrayed once and won't be again. There must be something we can do to close this rift.